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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experience with peer critique in a college-level composition course in English as a second language (ESL) suggests that it can be an effective classroom technique. If students are given very specific guidelines to follow, they often do a very credible job of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of their peers' writing. Indiana University's campus in Malaysia uses the technique in an advanced ESL writing course. Early experiences in using peer critique revealed that while ESL students are not the best judges of grammaticality, word choice, and mechanics, they can develop critical abilities concerning the content and organization of an essay, and the use of peer critique is now limited to those areas. In writing essays, the students make outlines, write the first draft in class, randomly exchange the drafts, and answer specific questions about others' essays on critique forms. The teacher then marks the essays and compares her comments with those in the peer critiques, indicating general agreement or disagreement. Rewriting is done in class, and student writers are encouraged to discuss the essays with the teacher and/or critic. Classroom discussion of logical relations, organization, and support in writing is provided. Students have found doing the critiques more helpful than receiving them. (MSE)

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Guided Peer Critique in ESL Writing at the College Level

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Most of the research which has been done into the effectiveness of peer feedback or peer critique in the teaching of writing has involved native speakers of English (e.g., Hays, 1982; Karengaines, Pascarella and Pflaum, 1980; Pierson, 1967). What research has been done with writers of English as a second language (e.g., Chaudron, 1984; Partridge, 1981) has been largely inconclusive. Nevertheless, many instructors of ESL writing continue to use some form of peer feedback out of the conviction that second language writers can learn something of value from looking critically at the writing of their peers.

Criticism which is often leveled at the notion of peer critique in ESL writing goes something like this: "Their own language skills aren't good enough to criticize someone else's writing." "When it's right, they mark it wrong!" "Having students correct each other's papers is more work than doing it myself." The bottom line for most instructors is the simple question of whether or not peer critique is more trouble than it's worth.

My own attempts at using peer critique with intermediate and advanced level ESL writers have met with varying degrees of success. My experience indicates, however, that if students are given very specific guidelines to follow, they often do a credible job of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses in the writing of their peers, particularly in the areas of content and organization. This paper is essentially a rationale for the use of peer critique in ESL composition courses, a discussion of what

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guided peer critique entails, and a description of the way it is currently used in a college level composition course.

The program in which this peer critique methodology has been developed is part of a cooperative venture between the government of Malaysia and Indiana University in the United States. Indiana University has established a kind of 'branch campus' in Malaysia where students complete the first two years of an American bachelor's degree before going to the U.S. for the last two years. The responsibility of the ESL program is consequently to prepare students to do academic work in English.

Since the medium of instruction in Malaysian schools is the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, and English is taught as a subject only, students in the Indiana University program have had limited experience with the use of English for academic purposes. Although many of them do quite well when assigned narrative or descriptive writing, the written expression of logical relations such as cause and effect and the clear and logical support of an argument pose real problems for the majority of students. Thus, the advanced ESL composition course, the last of the ESL series and the prerequisite for freshman English, has as its goal the development of these more complex academic writing skills.

Considerable trial and error with various kinds of peer critique during the first term of the course revealed what some of us suspected all along--ESL students are not the best judges of grammaticality, word choice and mechanics. They are, however, quite capable of developing critical abilities with regard to the content and organization of an essay, abilities which need to be developed if students are to meet the reading and writing requirements of academic courses. For these reasons, peer

critique in the advanced composition course is limited to the analysis of the content and organization of writing.

Each essay the students write is the product of a step-by-step process. First, readings are assigned to give the students background information and exposure to a variety of opinions on an issue. The readings are discussed briefly in class and possible thesis statements are suggested. Each student then prepares an essay outline which is approved by the instructor before the actual essay writing begins.

The first draft of the essay is written in class from the outline the student has prepared. The essays are then collected and distributed randomly at the beginning of the next class period. The students are instructed to read their classmate's essay carefully and then answer the questions on the peer critique form in as much detail as possible. At the end of the class period, the peer critiques are attached to the essays and collected.

(At the beginning of the term, the students generally need considerable guidance from the instructor in how to go about completing the peer critique form. To clarify the process, it is useful to do a 'preliminary' critique in which all the students critique copies of the same essay. Discussion of the process as it is carried out seems to be an effective way of introducing the students to this form of critical analysis.)

After the instructor has marked each essay, making corrections, indicating areas of weakness, and recommending possible improvements, his or her comments are compared to those of the student critiquer. If the student's comments are in general agreement with those of the instructor, the student receives a grade of +. If the student critiquer misses a few

areas of weakness but is able to make some reasonable recommendations, he or she receives a grade of ✓. If the student fails to critique the essay thoughtfully and/or accurately, he or she receives a grade of -. This 'grading' of the peer critiques emphasizes the importance of the analysis; students tend to take the assignment more seriously when they know their comments will be read and evaluated by the instructor.

When the marked first drafts are returned to the students, in-class rewriting begins. Students are free to ask questions of either the instructor or peer critiquers as they work on revising their essays. Two class periods are generally allowed for rewriting. The essays are then collected and graded using the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfie & Hughey, 1981).

Experience thus far indicates that the more specific the peer critique guidelines, the better the peer critique is likely to be. If the students all write in support of the same thesis statement, the peer critique guidelines can pose very specific questions. (See Appendix A). If they write on the same topic but assume different points of view, a slightly less focussed set of questions is needed. Peer critique guidelines can also be developed for each particular type of writing assignment (see Appendix B) for use when the students are free to choose their own topics.

Classroom discussion of logical relations, organization and support in writing is, of course, a necessary correlate to peer critique. Group analysis of common areas of weakness in content and organization in student writing helps the students to develop critical reading abilities. Such discussion also helps them to learn the 'language' of criticism. A student who writes "I don't think this is always true" in the first peer critique of the term may well be writing "This claim is too general--it

needs qualification" by the end of the term.

In an effort to discover how the students perceive the value of peer critique, a section of the course evaluation form at the end of each term asked them to rate the value of both doing and receiving peer critique. Out of 118 students, 104 considered *doing* peer critiques to be very helpful, while 6 students found it somewhat helpful. In contrast, only 52 students found *receiving* peer critique to be very helpful while 43 rated it somewhat helpful.

Student perception of the value of receiving peer critique is, of course, colored by the fact that peer critique of each essay was followed by the instructor's careful marking of the paper. Clearly, well-trained, experienced teachers of English are able to give the student writers the kind of specific feedback that they are likely to find most useful as they begin the process of revision. Peer critiques will seldom be as directive or as specific as those of the instructor. If the goal is simply improvement in revision, instructor critique would appear to be preferable to peer critique.

The real value of peer critique in an advanced ESL composition course appears to be in the doing rather than in the receiving. Responding to their classmates' essays forces the students to interact through writing and emphasizes the importance of writing for an audience. Yes, peer critique is time consuming. Yes, student feedback is sometimes vague, incomplete or even mistaken. Yet peer critique offers the students an opportunity to develop their critical reading skills with material that is at their own language level. It also functions as the first step in learning to look at their own writing more critically at the rewriting stage.

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Appendix A

Peer-Critique: "How advertising techniques influence consumers"

Name of Evaluator_____

Name of Writer_____

Directions: Number the sentences in the essay by putting the number 1 above the first word in the first sentence, a number 2 above the first word in the second sentence and so forth, numbering all the sentences in the essay. Then follow the directions and answer the questions below.

1. Which sentence contains the thesis statement?____ Is it clearly stated?_____

2. How many general advertising techniques are discussed in this essay? ____ Are any of these techniques unimportant or insignificant and better left out of the essay?_____If so, which ones?_____

   Comments/suggestions:

3. Are the techniques clearly explained?_____Are enough examples provided? _____ Does each of the techniques clearly result in greater consumer interest in the product?_____Comments/suggestions:

4. Give the numbers of any repetitive sentences:_____

   Give the numbers of any irrelevant sentences:_____

5. Are the cause-effect relationships in this essay logical?_____

   Do any of the claims need to be qualified?_____

   Suggestions:

6. Is the essay developed well enough to support the thesis statement?____Can you suggest any additions?

7. Does the conclusion fit the thesis statement and support?_____

   Comments/suggestions:

8. Additional comments:

Appendix B

Peer-Critique: Argumentative Essay

Name of Evaluator_____

Name of Essay Writer_____

Directions: Number the sentences in the essay by putting the number 1 above the first word in the first sentence, a number 2 above the first word in the second sentence and so forth, numbering all the sentences in the essay. Then follow the directions and answer the questions below.

1. Does the introduction give you a clear idea of the purpose of the essay?
_____ Comments/suggestions:

2. Give the number of the sentence which includes the thesis statement_____ Is the thesis statement clearly stated?_____
Comments/suggestions:

3. Is the writer's first claim clearly stated?_____ Does it support the thesis?_____Is it supported with enough information, examples, or statistics?_____Is the support logical?_____Comments/suggestions:

4. Is the writer's second claim clearly stated?____ Does it support the thesis?_____Is it supported with enough information, examples, or statistics?_____Is the support logical?____Comments/suggestions:

5. Is the writer's third claim clearly stated?____ Does it support the thesis?_____Is it supported with enough information, examples, or statistics?_____Is the support logical?_____Comments/suggestions:

6. Is there a counterargument? _____If so, is it clearly stated?_____Is the counterargument refuted adequately?_____Comments/suggestions:

7. Are the suporting claims given in any logical order? _____Would reordering them improve the essay?_____Suggestions:

8. Give the numbers of any repetitive sentences:_____

Give the numbers of any irrelevant sentences:_____

9. Is the essay developed well enough to support the thesis statement? _____ Can you suggest any additions?

10. Does the conclusion fit the thesis statement and main points? _____ Comments/suggestions: